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And to the west we have Aransgaard, our second largest ally, framed by Larion and Etendra. . . Princess Anna . . . Princess Anna! Are you paying attention?”

I slowly peeled my gaze away from the open window beside me and focused on my tutor. He was frowning over at me from his desk, the red whiskers above his lip quivering with his irritation. I hastened to recall the words of his lesson, trying not to think of the sunshine, trees, and archery ranges calling my name outside. Father had given me a new horse the other day for my tenth birthday, and I was itching to ride as well. Instead I was stuck in this drafty room with my tutor and my sisters.

“You said Larion and Etendra frame Aransgaard, our second largest ally,” I said promptly, knowing I was right by the look of relief on Katherine’s gentle face. I smiled sweetly at our tutor (Carlton, I think his name was). He harrumphed but turned back to his desk.

I looked down at the map in front of me. In reality I didn't know why I was required to learn all this. I was fifth in line for the throne. I would only be Queen if my father and then all my siblings died. Meddorr was the military capital of Afaennon. Someone would have to be insane to try and attack it. This was why we had only allies, with the exception of Astara. And we were winning that war, or so Carlton told us.

“Please,” I spoke up suddenly. “May we be finished?”

Carlton glowered at me, his mustache twitching erratically now. “Tell me the capitals of the countries, which country is known for what vocation, and why we are fighting Astara, and I’ll let you go.”

I thought long and hard, trying to remember the lesson I'd mostly ignored all morning. Thankfully we had been studying Afaennon for the past week and bits and pieces had stuck with me and, with the help of Katherine’s subtle signals, I was able to gather the information together.

“Istra is the capital of Meddorr,” I began in a monotone, “which is known for its superior military and its grain stores. Telrain is the capital of Etendra. It’s known for its fish markets and ship builders. Celesthem is the capital of Aransgaard, which is known for its horse breeding, orchards, and fruit and vegetable merchants. Lysoria is the capital of Larion. The country's known for its artisans and religious sanctuaries. Then there’s Drosna, capital of Astara, which is known for its factories and . . . that’s about it. But it’s the only country with a mountain range and a desert.”

Carlton nodded grudgingly. “Humph, very good. However, you still have not told me why we are fighting Astara.”

I had to think harder about that one. Honestly, I'd never given much thought to the war. Finally I had to settle with, “Because King Gaspare is a tyrant who wants to force the other countries of Afaennon under his rule?” I hadn’t meant for it to come out as a question, but Carlton was nodding again, so I leaped to my feet.

“Thank you for the lesson, Carlton,” I said as politely as I could, dropping a short curtsy. “It was very . . . enlightening.” I finished with a hint of mockery.

His face turned beet red, but I laughed and scampered out the door in search of John.

He was on the archery range, practicing, but I persuaded him to come with me to the stables. He complained a great deal about how I was interfering with his chances at beating the local archery champion at a competition the two of them had arranged. Even so, I doubted he was truly annoyed with me, for he was grinning and gently mussed my hair.

On the way to the stables was a side road that led to the grain storage area. Farmers from around Meddorr, Larion, Aransgaard, and Etendra came every harvest to drop off a portion of their grain. Then, when the dry seasons came, Father distributed the stored grain among the people. This was part of their tax as well, in exchange for Meddorr's protection. Father only charged the least amount of tax he could afford, however. Everyone loved my father. Every Festival Day (we had one for each season, within the season), Father and the rest of the royalty would go into the streets of Istra to participate in the festivities. We would then travel to our ally kingdoms and join in the festivals held there. It was great fun, and I looked forward to it every year. Even though the war waged to the west, Father still wanted everyone to feel safe and happy.

John was going on about some trick he was going to use in order to fool the local champion into thinking John was not as good as he was, when he stopped walking suddenly, putting a hand out to the side to stop me as well. I looked up at him, confused, before I realized we were standing next to the path that led to the storage buildings, and someone was sneaking toward it in a way that appeared very suspicious. Always one up for adventure, John took off running toward the figure. I'd no choice but to follow, not wanting to continue on and allow curiosity to eat at me for the rest of the afternoon. When I arrived at the storage building, I saw John holding a small boy by the back of his shirt with one hand, while the other held on tightly to the boy's arm. The boy was struggling, albeit weakly. As I came closer, I realized he couldn't have been that much younger than John, but he was so scrawny he appeared to be younger than me. His clothes were ragged and torn and hung loosely on his thin frame. When he turned his head toward me, I was taken aback by how large his brown eyes looked in a face made of sharp angles and tight skin over bone. His hair had been shaved completely off, and I could only just see tips of dark brown stubble covering his head like a shadow.

“Anna, remind me what the punishment is for stealing grain again? One hundred lashes?” John's voice was light and teasing, but his eyes were serious and his grip never faltered.

I was mesmerized by the large eyes that now held fear and seemed to plead with me to show mercy. It took a moment for John's question to register. I stammered out, “Only twenty,” just as the boy's skeletal frame collapsed to the ground. He grabbed at the hem of my dress, wetting it with his tears.

“Please,” he begged weakly in an unfamiliar accent. “I only wished for some food to take back to my family. They're starving, miss! I'm the only provider for my family, and if I don't find a way to feed them they'll die!”

I stared down at him, dumbfounded. “But . . . no one starves in Meddorr,” I said in a small voice, looking up at John for help. His lips were set in a straight line, and I could see no compassion in his face for this poor boy at my feet. Anger filled me then. How could John simply stand by and let this boy's family starve? It was obvious he was telling the truth. Simply looking at the boy confirmed his story.

I knelt and grasped the boy's shoulders, feeling the bones so keenly I immediately loosened my grip, afraid I would hurt him. “I will get you grain for your family,” I promised, unable to tear my eyes away from the wet pools of liquid brown staring up at me in surprise. I wondered why he seemed so shocked I was willing to take his side. Hadn't he just asked for my help?

John wanted to protest, I could see it in his expression. But the look I gave him was so fierce he did nothing but stand close by as I helped the boy to his feet and led him to the storage area. The guards had been watching us the entire time; I could tell by their curious gazes. When I told them to give the boy a bag of grain to take to his family, they started and one of them frowned apprehensively.

“Princess, you know we cannot allow anyone to take grain unless your father commands us to.”

I scowled. What was the good of being a princess if not even the guards would obey me? I looked to John for help, and he stepped forward with a reluctant sigh.

“He told us to tell you,” he lied easily. “This boy was sup-posed to wait at the palace for us to come with him, but I guess he felt he couldn't wait any longer.” He swept his light brown hair out of his eyes to look disapprovingly at the boy.

The boy's expression had changed from one of shock to one of awe. His eyes were dry now, and flickered back and forth between my face and John's. I gave the guards a firm nod and knew they couldn't protest. Besides, my father was fair. If we were lying, it would be us who would get in trouble, not the guards for simply following orders.

In no time at all, the boy had a bag of grain. At first I thought he wouldn't be able to carry it, the weight being too much for his fragile, weak frame, but to my surprise he flung it onto his back with ease. Then he grinned at me and winked.

“Thank you for your kindness,” he said, before darting off down the road so fast that when I blinked he was gone.

“But—but—I thought . . .” I trailed off, looking to John for an explanation. I didn't know much about starvation, but I had a good idea that a starving child wouldn't be strong enough to run with a bag full of grain on his back.

John's face registered no surprise. “I'm sure he was hungry, he really was that scrawny, and I bet his story was true too. But I knew the weakness and the crying was just a disguise. He used us.” He scowled. “He shouldn't even be allowed to be here, and we allowed him to come and go *with our people's grain*, because of a few tears and a pretense of starvation.” He shook his head in disgust, and I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach.

“What do you mean, he shouldn't be allowed here?” I asked in a small voice.

John looked over at me sharply. “He was a Traveler,” he spat. “Couldn't you tell?”

I could say nothing for a moment. John stormed off in the direction of the stables, still fuming over being deceived by a reviled Traveler. I remembered the look the Traveler boy had given me, how easily I'd fallen for his scheme. What if John hadn't been there with me? What if the Traveler had thrown me over his shoulder like the sack of grain and carried me off with his swift feet? I would have been gone before the guards could have reacted. His family would have feasted on my brain. A shiver ran up my spine, and I ran forward to grab John's hand.

“If you knew, why didn't you turn him over?” I said softly, looking up into his tight expression. “Why did you lie for him?”

John looked startled for a moment, then a slightly confused frown crossed his fair features. “I-I guess I fell for the act too. At first. It wasn't until he was running that I realized . . .”

“Why didn't you send the guards after him, then?”

My brother didn't answer and wore a troubled look for the rest of the walk. When we arrived at the stables, he brightened somewhat, and while we rode he relaxed into his usual teasing self. But when we had finished our ride and were returning to our rooms to freshen up for supper, he had that look again.

I was just about to close my door when he spoke. I opened it quickly and stared at him in shock. He looked away self-consciously at my horrified expression and retreated quickly down the hall to his room. His words stayed with me however, even as he disappeared around a corner.

"I guess," he'd said softly, "I couldn't stand to see him locked up while his family went hungry. I mean, what kind of person would *I* be if I let people starve?"

I couldn't believe that my brother, the one who had trained me so well to be frightened of Travelers, had thought of them in that way. They were not people, he'd said so many times. They were monsters. Finally I decided that it was the Traveler's fault. With his sad, beguiling brown eyes, that hid his deceit so well, he'd fooled my brother into believing they were people. Instantly my imagination transformed the pitiful appearance of the boy into what it truly was: a disguise. Underneath I saw his true form. Pointed teeth, hungry, blood-red eyes, claws instead of fingers. In my memory he'd been mocking me with that wink, had laughed as he ran off over how easy it had been to fool us. A shiver ran down my spine, and I hoped John would get over the evil Traveler's spell quickly.

When I went down for supper, it appeared as though he had. He was teasing Katherine and Susan, and, when Father asked what had happened down at the storage building, John told the story of how a hideous Traveler had threatened to kill us if we didn't give him grain. He explained how he'd gone along with the scheme only because he was afraid for my life. He grinned at me when he was done, and I knew the spell had been broken. My brother knew better than I did, he was smarter than me in such things, so I knew what he said had to be true. We had been trick-ed into seeing a pathetic little boy no older than me, when in reality a terrifying demon had been setting a trap.

It made me feel glad I had a brother who could protect me from such things. I was convinced now that we were only alive because he'd acquiesced to the thief. I swore at that moment to never again trust a Traveler, no matter how innocent they appeared to be.

